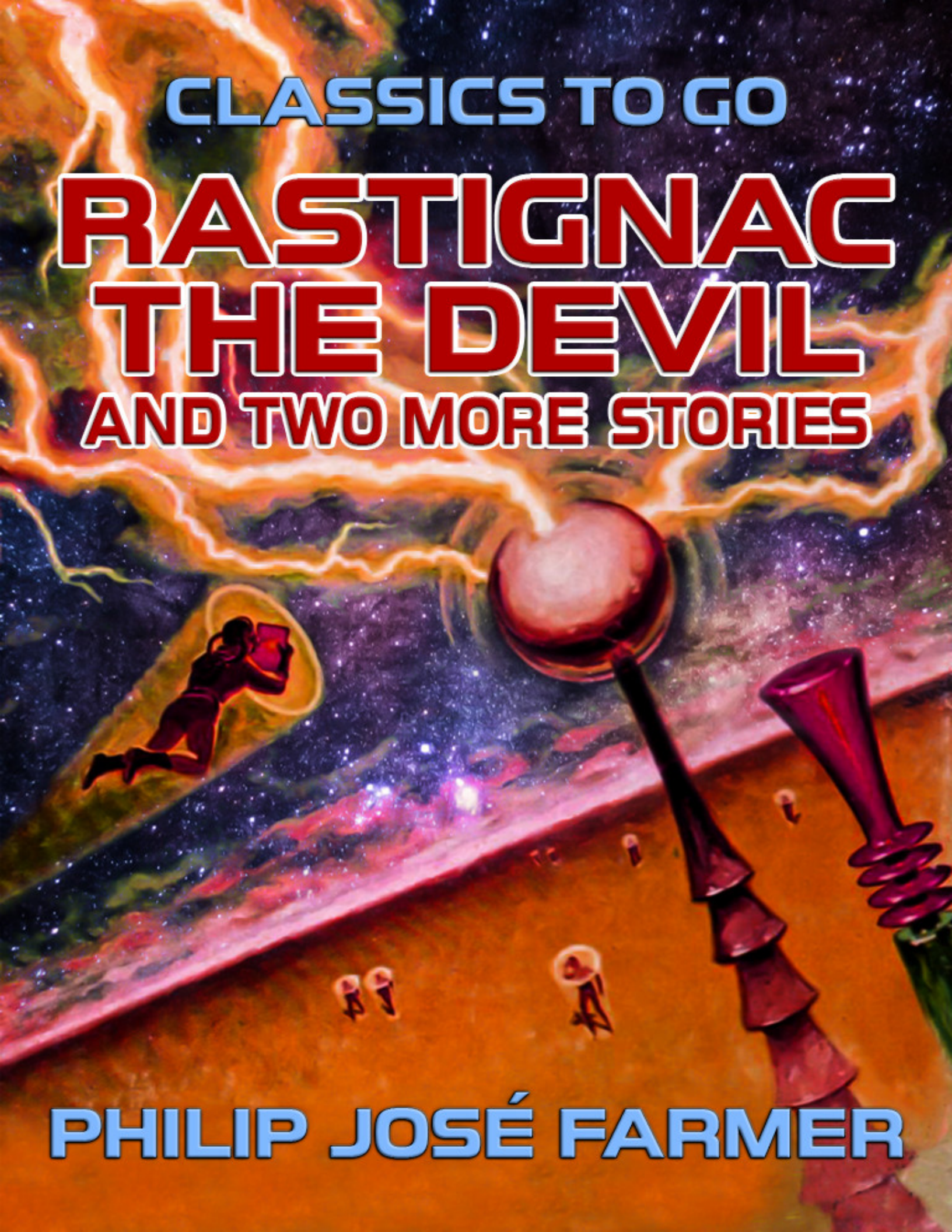


CLASSICS TO GO

RASTIGNAC THE DEVIL AND TWO MORE STORIES

PHILIP JOSÉ FARMER



Rastignac
The Devil
And two more stories
Philip José Farmer

Rastignac the devil

I

Enslaved by a triangular powered despotism—one lone man sets his sights to the Six Bright Stars and eventual freedom of his world.

After the Apocalyptic War, the decimated remnants of the French huddled in the Loire Valley were gradually squeezed between two new and growing nations. The Colossus to the north was unfriendly and obviously intended to absorb the little New France. The Colossus to the south was friendly and offered to take the weak state into its confederation of republics as a full partner.

A number of proud and independent French citizens feared that even the latter alternative meant the eventual transmutation of their tongue, religion and nationality into those of their southern neighbor. Seeking a way of salvation, they built six huge space-ships that would hold thirty thousand people, most of whom would be in deep freeze until they reached their destination. The six vessels then set off into interstellar space to find a planet that would be as much like Earth as possible.

That was in the 22nd Century. Over three hundred and fifty years passed before Earth heard of them again. However, we are not here concerned with the home world but with the story of a man of that pioneer group who wanted to leave the New Gaul and sail again to the stars....

Rastignac had no Skin. He was, nevertheless, happier than he had been since the age of five.

He was as happy as a man can be who lives deep under the ground. Underground organizations are often under the ground. They are formed into cells. Cell Number One usually contains the leader of the underground.

Jean-Jacques Rastignac, chief of the Legal Underground of the Kingdom of L'Bawpfey, was literally in a cell beneath the surface of the earth. He was in jail.

For a dungeon, it wasn't bad. He had two cells. One was deep inside the building proper, built into the wall so that he could sit in it when he wanted to retreat from the sun or the rain. The adjoining cell was at the bottom of a well whose top was covered with a grille of thin steel bars. Here he spent most of his waking hours. Forced to look upwards if he wanted to see the sky or the stars, Rastignac suffered from a chronic stiff neck.

Several times during the day he had visitors. They were allowed to bend over the grille and talk down to him. A guard, one of the King's mucketeers, stood by as a censor.

When night came, Rastignac ate the meal let down by ropes on a platform. Then another of the King's mucketeers stood by with drawn épée until he had finished eating. When the tray was pulled back up and the grille lowered and locked, the mucketeer marched off with the turnkey.

Rastignac sharpened his wit by calling a few choice insults to the night guard, then went into the cell inside the wall and lay down to take a nap. Later, he would rise and pace back and forth like a caged tiger. Now and then he would stop and look upwards, scan the stars, hunch his shoulders and resume his savage circuit of the cell. But the time would

come when he would stand statue-still. Nothing moved except his head, which turned slowly.

"Some day I'll ride to the stars with you."

He said it as he watched the Six Flying Stars speed across the night sky—six glowing stars that moved in a direction opposite to the march of the other stars. Bright as Sirius seen from Earth, strung out one behind the other like jewels on a velvet string, they hurtled across the heavens.

They were the six ships on which the original Loire Valley Frenchmen had sailed out into space, seeking a home on a new planet. They had been put into an orbit around New Gaul and left there while their thirty thousand passengers had descended to the surface in chemical-fuel rockets. Mankind, once on the fair and fresh earth of the new planet, had never again ascended to re-visit the great ships.

For three hundred years the six ships had circled the planet known as New Gaul, nightly beacons and glowing reminders to Man that he was a stranger on this planet.

When the Earthmen landed on the new planet they had called the new land *Le Beau Pays*, or, as it was now pronounced, *L'Bawpfey*—The Beautiful Country. They had been delighted, entranced with the fresh new land. After the burned, war-racked Earth they had just left, it was like coming to Heaven.

They found two intelligent species living on the planet, and they found that the species lived in peace and that they had no conception of war or of poverty. And they were quite willing to receive the Terrans into their society.

Provided, that is, they became integrated, or—as they phrased it—natural. The Frenchmen from Earth had been given their choice. They were told:

"You can live with the people of the Beautiful Land on our terms—war with us, or leave to seek another planet."

The Terrans conferred. Half of them decided to stay; the other half decided to remain only long enough to mine uranium and other chemicals. Then they would voyage onwards.

But nobody from that group of Earthmen ever again stepped into the ferry-rockets and soared up to the six ion-beam ships circling about Le Beau Pays. All succumbed to the Philosophy of the Natural. Within a few generations a stranger landing upon the planet would not have known without previous information that the Terrans were not aboriginal.

He would have found three species. Two were warm-blooded egglayers who had evolved directly from reptiles without becoming mammals—the Ssassarors and the Amphibs. Somewhere in their dim past—like all happy nations, they had no history—they had set up their society and been very satisfied with it since.

It was a peaceful quiet world, largely peasant, where nobody had to scratch for a living and where a superb manipulation of biological forces ensured very long lives, no disease, and a social lubrication that left little to desire—from their viewpoint, anyway.

The government was, nominally, a monarchy. The Kings were elected by the people and were a different species than the group each ruled. Ssassaror ruled Human, and vice versa, each assisted by foster-brothers and sisters of the race over which they reigned. These were the so-called Dukes and Duchesses.

The Chamber of Deputies—*L'Syawp t' Tapfuti*—was half Human and half Ssassaror. The so-called Kings took turns

presiding over the Chamber for forty day intervals. The Deputies were elected for ten-year terms by constituents who could not be deceived about their representatives' purposes because of the sensitive Skins which allowed them to determine their true feelings and worth.

In one custom alone did the ex-Terrans differ from their neighbors. This was in carrying arms. In the beginning, the Ssassaror had allowed the Men to wear their short rapiers, so they would feel safe even though in the midst of aliens.

As time went on, only the King's mucketeers—and members of the official underground—were allowed to carry épées. These men, it might be noticed, were the congenital adventurers, men who needed to swashbuckle and revel in the name of individualist.

Like the egg-stealers, they needed an institution in which they could work off anti-social steam.

From the beginning the Amphibians had been a little separate from the Ssassaror and when the Earthmen came they did not get any more neighborly. Nevertheless, they preserved excellent relations and they, too, participated in the Changeling-custom.

This Changeling-custom was another social device set up millennia ago to keep a mutual understanding between all species on the planet. It was a peculiar institution, one that the Earthmen had found hard to understand and ever more difficult to adopt. Nevertheless, once the Skins had been accepted they had changed their attitude, forgot their speculations about its origin and threw themselves into the custom of stealing babies—or eggs—from another race and raising the children as their own.

You rob my cradle; I'll rob yours. Such was their motto, and it worked.

A Guild of Egg Stealers was formed. The Human branch of it guaranteed, for a price, to bring you a Ssassaror child to replace the one that had been stolen from you. Or, if you lived on the sea-shore, and an Amphibian had crept into your nursery and taken your baby—always under two years old, according to the rules—then the Guildsman would bring you an Amphib or, perhaps, the child of a Human Changeling reared by the Seafolk.

You raised it and loved it as your own. How could you help loving it?

Your Skin told you that it was small and helpless and needed you and was, despite appearances, as Human as any of your babies. Nor did you need to worry about the one that had been abducted. It was getting just as good care as you were giving this one.

It had never occurred to anyone to quit the stealing and voluntary exchange of babies. Perhaps that was because it would strain even the loving nature of the Skin-wearers to give away their own flesh and blood. But once the transfer had taken place, they could adapt.

Or perhaps the custom was kept because tradition is stronger than law in a peasant-monarchy society and also because egg-and-baby stealing gave the more naturally aggressive and daring citizens a chance to work off anti-social behavior.

Nobody but a historian would have known, and there were no historians in The Beautiful Land.

Long ago the Ssassaror had discovered that if they lived meatless, they had a much easier time curbing their belligerency, obeying the Skins and remaining cooperative. So they induced the Earthmen to put a taboo on eating flesh. The only drawback to the meatless diet was that both

Ssassaror and Man became as stunted in stature as they did in aggressiveness, the former so much so that they barely came to the chins of the Humans. These, in turn, would have seemed short to a Western European.

But Rastignac, an Earthman, and his good friend, Mapfarity, the Ssassaror Giant, became taboo-breakers when they were children and played together on the beach where they first ate seafood out of curiosity, then continued because they liked it. And due to their protein diet the Terran had grown well over six feet in height and the Ssassaror seemed to have touched off a rocket of expansion in his body with his protein-eating. Those Ssassarors who shared his guilt—became meat-eaters—became ostracized and eventually moved off to live by themselves. They were called Ssassaror-Giants and were pointed to as an object lesson to the young of the normal Ssassarors and Humans on the land.

If a stranger had landed shortly before Rastignac was born, however, he would have noticed that all was not as serene as it was supposed to be among the different species. The cause for the flaw in the former Eden might have puzzled him if he had not known the previous history of *L'Bawfey* and the fact that the situation had not changed for the worst until the introduction of Human Changelings among the Amphibians.

Then it had been that blood-drinking began among them, that Amphibians began seducing Humans to come live with them by their tales of easy immortality, and that they started the system of leaving savage little carnivores in the Human nurseries.

When the Land-dwellers protested, the Amphibs replied that these things were carried out by unnaturals or outlaws, and

that the Sea-King could not be held responsible. Permission was given to Chalice those caught in such behavior.

Nevertheless, the suspicion remained that the Amphib monarch had, in accordance with age-old procedure, given his unofficial official blessing and that he was preparing even more disgusting and outrageous and unnatural moves. Through his control of the populace by the Master Skin, he would be able to do as he pleased with their minds.

It was the Skins that had made the universal peace possible on the planet of New Gaul. And it would be the custom of the Skins that would make possible the change from peace to conflict among the populace.

Through the artificial Skins that were put on all babies at birth—and which grew with them, attached to their body, feeding from their bloodstreams, their nervous systems—the Skins, controlled by a huge Master Skin that floated in a chemical vat in the palace of the rulers, fed, indoctrinated and attended day and night by a crew of the most brilliant scientists of the planet, gave the Kings complete control of the minds and emotions of the inhabitants of the planet.

Originally the rulers of New Gaul had desired only that the populace live in peace and enjoy the good things of their planet equally. But the change that had been coming gradually—the growth of conflict between the Kings of the different species for control of the whole populace—was beginning to be generally felt. Uneasiness, distrust of each other was growing among the people. Hence the legalizing of the Underground, the Philosophy of Violence by the government, an effort to control the revolt that was brewing.

Yet, the Land-dwellers had managed to take no action at all and to ignore the growing number of vicious acts.

But not all were content to drowse. One man was aroused. He was Rastignac.

They were Rastignac's hope, those Six Stars, the gods to which he prayed. When they passed quickly out of his sight he would continue his pacing, meditating for the twenty-thousandth time on a means for reaching one of those ships and using it to visit the stars. The end of his fantasies was always a curse because of the futility of such hopes. He was doomed! Mankind was doomed!

And it was all the more maddening because Man would not admit that he was through. Ended, that is, as a human being.

Man was changing into something not quite *homo sapiens*. It might be a desirable change, but it would mean the finish of his climb upwards. So it seemed to Rastignac. And he, being the man he was, had decided to do something about it even if it meant violence.

That was why he was now in the well-dungeon. He was an advocator of violence against the status quo.